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## COMPOSITION IN THE FIRST AND SECOND YEARS OF HIGH SCHOOL

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In the agitation that is taking place with reference to the teaching of English, composition seems to occupy the storm center. Dr. Judd in his discussion of it becomes a veritable cyclone—or perhaps the better word would be undertaker. In that burial ground he speaks of, he has carefully laid away in their little graves not only the children's human interests, but the English teacher as well, and stamped down the dirt. "There!" said the innkeeper when he had hung the devil.

But with women constituting so overwhelming a majority of the teachers of English in the high school, Dr. Judd surely did not expect to have the last word. We do not think that English composition is in the hopelessly bad way in which Dr. Judd represents it to be. We maintain that it is entirely possible, not only to develop reasonable correctness of expression in the children, but to make them eager searchers after the true and the beautiful, and we shall attempt to prove it.

Let us first state definitely what the problem of the high-school teacher of composition is. Constant repetition of the conditions with which she has to contend has made it almost unnecessary to state that the chief difficulties are two. The majority of the pupils enter the first year of high school, not ignorant of what constitutes good usage in writing, but indifferent; they seem to lack any ideas worth expressing. The problem is to break down this indifference to good usage, and to reach the store of childish ideas that lie back of the apparently blank consciousness of the average child. That this can be done by basing the compositions in the first two years on personal experience developed by means of specific detail is the text of this paper.

In the very beginning it is necessary to differ from those who consider exposition the only practical form of composition, and who see in description and narration only a means to increase the appreciation of literature, or an over-ambitious attempt to train for a literary career the few at the expense of the many. If narration and description had no other value, this attitude would be justifiable, but their function is of far greater importance than this. The first step in the high-school course must be to get at the ideas of the children and bring them to the surface. This can be done satisfactorily only by basing the compositions on personal experience in the form of narration and description. This does not mean narration and description technically developed with an eye to the production of literary masterpieces. It does mean that the compositions for the first two years should be a record of sense impressions, and not of the results of such mental processes as analysis or generalization. In other words, narration and description are not an end in themselves but a means of arousing the children, by developing their observation, to feel a conscious pleasure in what they see and hear and feel in the world around them.

As the initial step in justifying this position, it is necessary to make clear exactly what is meant by the terms "narration" and "description." Simple narration is the form of discourse the purpose of which is to present the sequence of events. Simple description is the form of discourse the purpose of which, as we intend to narrow down the term, is to present a picture. Narration, however, is often presented as a series of pictures; description often contains a great deal of action. The only distinction it is possible to make between the two is that in the one the interest lies in the course of events, in the other in the picture presented. The source of the two is identical. Broadly speaking, the only mental process necessary to produce narration and description is to receive sense impressions and reproduce them. You look at the scene, object, or incident, and reproduce what you see and hear. The process partakes of the nature of the equation,  $r = r$ .

Between narration and description on the one hand, however, and exposition and argumentation on the other, there is a sharp distinction. The terms exposition and argumentation are applied

to those forms of discourse which are records of generalizations and conclusions. This means a less simple mental process than is involved in description and narration, for it requires one more step. Broadly speaking again, we first receive mentally our sense impressions and then come to conclusions concerning them. What we express is no longer our impressions but our conclusions. This makes necessary not only clear seeing but clear thinking. Our equation becomes  $1+3$ , or  $1\div 3$ , or  $1\times 3$ ,  $=4$  or  $\frac{1}{3}$  or 3, according to the way in which 3 enters into the calculation. In other words, narration, description, exposition, and argumentation are both forms of discourse and modes of thought.

It is this distinction between the mental processes involved that is the psychological basis for the teaching of narration and description in the first two years of high school. The children are still at the narrative-descriptive stage of their mental development. History substantiates this. It is illustrated in the history of every nation that has a literature in the successive steps by which that literature developed. Early stages of literature have always been narrative. The great epics belong to the childhood of the nations that produced them. No expository prose has developed that is interesting otherwise than historically till a nation has reached maturity.

Experiment offers additional proof. It shows that the children, if they are given an opportunity to choose, prefer narration and description. In the *English Journal* for January, 1913, Mr. James H. Harris, superintendent of schools at Dubuque, Iowa, gives an account of a very interesting experiment along these lines. The article is entitled, "An Inquiry into the Compositional Interests of Pupils in the Seventh and Eighth Grades." The fact that the experiment did not deal with high-school pupils does not lessen the value of its application in this connection, for it is hardly necessary to state that the children of the first two years of high school are far more like the seventh- and eighth-grade children in their interests, point of view, and mental processes than they are like the children of the eleventh and twelfth grades. Mr. Harris' experiment showed that the order of choice was as follows: (1) narrative; (2) descriptive; (3) reasoning; (4) explanatory. In his own words,

"The demonstration that narrative and descriptive topics are largely preferred was conclusive."

All this only substantiates experience. It seems to explain very completely why so much of the composition seems to offer insurmountable difficulties. We all know that when the compositions take the form of exposition in the first two years, the results are never satisfactory. There is lacking the active and spontaneous interest that is the breath of life to composition. My own experience has been that the teaching of narration and description produces an ever-widening horizon of interest and pleasure.

Determining the form that composition shall take, however, only clears the ground for a beginning, for the secret of teaching narration and description is to develop them by means of specific detail. That is, the compositions are to contain no vague conclusions or glittering generalities, but the details of what the children actually saw, or heard, or felt, that led to the conclusions or justified the generalities. The practical value of this is that it gives the children command of an almost unlimited amount of material. Instead of a single unsatisfactory summary sentence, they write half a page or a page of detail. How important it is that this should be possible, every teacher of composition knows.

The next step forward comes when the children learn that the use of specific detail gives them an infallible means, easily handled, of arousing and holding the interest of their audience. They come to understand from their own experience that what lies back of the use of specific detail is the fact that it makes their readers or listeners see a mental picture and that the direct result of this is to arouse immediate interest. There is now established for the children the motive of an interested appreciative audience and this is the greatest stimulus there is for composition writing.

The third value of specific detail is the fact that when the children have learned its full significance, their powers of observation begin to grow by leaps and bounds. They begin to see what they never saw before, to hear what they never heard before, to feel

what they never felt before. They develop a conscious pleasure in the world around them that deepens and intensifies with the very fact of its existence. When the children have reached this point, there are no difficulties left worth the name. They have disappeared over night. One of the most interesting and most astounding facts connected with the teaching of composition is this strange truth, that while accuracy of expression can never be attained if the aim is directly for it, it suddenly appears as a by-product in the realization of some broader purpose.

However, important as all this is, nothing is so important as the fact that the children learn to appreciate sincerity. They learn that the great essential is to tell the truth. They are quick to recognize and appreciate a really truthful presentation of a familiar experience, and hand in hand with this comes an understanding of the futility of insincerity and make-believe. The compositions in which they take the most enthusiastic interest are the successful presentations of the commonplace everyday experiences that are familiar to all. Among the compositions reproduced below, none was received with more surprised delight than was "Doc and the Farmer Boy," which described a situation familiar to all, even in some cases from direct participation. I am sure that it is not claiming too much to say that that little composition gives a dignity and feeling to the occupation of ploughing that is realized by everyone who reads it, or hears it read. In the words of Mr. Chubb, and I wish I had said them first, "Work in description or narration involves much more than mere observance of the rules of grammar and rhetorical construction: it is at once a training of the eye to see, the mind to discriminate its objects and impressions, the heart to report its feelings of beauty and delight, the conscience and memory to be true to fact."

The group of compositions offered below in illustration is not comprehensive. Space has limited the choice. They are typical examples, however, of childish effort, not to produce a literary masterpiece, nor a series of faultless sentences, but to reproduce the truth. They have been printed as they were written, with faulty spelling, punctuation, and awkward wording. I sincerely hope that others will find them interesting.

*First Year. Narration*

One of the early assignments solely for the purpose of developing specific detail. Choice of subject: (1) The milkman brought in the milk. (2) The grocery boy brought in the groceries; or any kindred topic. All special incidents barred to center the interest in the commonplaceness of the happening.

## THE CONDUCTOR

As the car stopped, with the hiss of the air-brake, the conductor leaned out, with his left hand on the bell-rope, and helped a lady to mount the steps with his right. After he had jerked the bell-rope, he slowly followed the lady into the car. She was engaged in conversation with a friend and did not notice him approaching. He said, "Fare please," in a polite tone; the lady looked up, said, "Oh!" and began fumbling in her purse. The conductor, his hand grasping a strap, gazed obligingly out of a window. The lady, having found a dollar, handed it to him and murmured, "Zoo-Eden-Avondale, please." The conductor began dealing out change from his money-belt. He handed her the ninety-five cents and asked the name of the transfer, which he punched carefully in three places. The little bits of paper from the punch fluttered down on the lady's dress. She gave her dress three consecutive brushes, indignantly. The conductor, meantime, had sauntered out on the platform, after he had rung up the fare, and, leaning back, he adjusted the trolleys with infinite skill.

## THE GROCERY BOY

The grocery boy drove up to the house in a rattling old wagon which looked as if it needed a good coat of paint. The boy jumped down from his perch on the seat and jerked the basket off, little caring whether the eggs broke or not. He had a mop of hair which reminded one of carrots. It was surmounted by an old cap rakishly set on. His face was generously covered with large, brown freckles, in the midst of which gleamed two very merry blue eyes.

He perched the basket on one shoulder and went whistling loudly around the house to the kitchen. He rattled the door-knob and lustily called out, "Gros-a-ries!" When the door was opened, he thumped across the floor to the table and set the groceries down with a bang. The door was given a hard slam and he was off to his wagon whistling a merry tune.

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*Assignment.*—Subject: A game. Composition must contain details of action. The incident must be narrowed down to a single incident with a center of interest. Explanatory beginning to be avoided.

## A HUNT IN THE PLAYHOUSE

After all were safely inside the dingy one-room playhouse crouching and lying in various uncomfortable positions the nearest one tied the door by means of a strong cord. Behind the barrel, behind the gasoline can, under the

bench and in dark corners; all were favorite and hasty resorts of the excited participants. Presently a loud thud was heard at the door followed by suppressed giggles from within. Then all was silence. Before we realized what was happening the outside covering of the shattered remnant of the window was ripped off. Then came a hard struggle by those inside. After much tugging and pulling a voice from without was heard to say "I'm not going to play. It is not fair to tie the door and I shan't try any more." Whereupon the door burst open and out rushed a laughing group.

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*Assignment.*—Choice of subject: At the barn. At the pond. In the playhouse. The composition to begin with description.

### FUN IN THE PLAYHOUSE

Smoke poured out of the hut in Johnny's back-yard. It was thick, grey, pungent smoke. It came through every crack and crevice in the walls and these were many. A great belch of it came out as the board which served as a door was thrown rudely open.

Two very small boys rushed out. Their faces were streaked with soot and dirt. A grimy fist was in each eye from which water washed clean streaks on their faces. They were sneezing and gasping for breath and if they had been your own sons you would not have recognized them.

Johnny was the first to find his voice. He said, "It's most quit now. Lets go back in."

"All right," said little Jim, and turning they re-entered the hut from which soon came the excited chatter of voices.

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*Assignment.*—Subject: Small children at play. Composition to contain conversation.

### INDIAN TIMES

"There is a pale face!" cried one of Indians, pointing at a smaller boy than any in the tribe.

"Capture him! Capture him!," cried several Indians, at once.

The small band crossed the street, waving ropes and clubs as they ran, and giving the fiercest warwhoops, that you ever heard.

They seized the dazed boy before he had time to run. Paying no attention to his protests, they bore him to a large empty lot.

"Better let me go," said the white captive.

"Shut up! The worst is yet to come," said one of the red men.

The band stopped at a small tree, and began to tie their captive to it. Seeing what they were doing the little fellows face puckered up, and he began to cry.



When he began to cry, the hard hearts of the Indians softened.

"Ah! Let him go," said one of them.

"Sure. We don't want a cry-baby, anyway," said another.

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Two compositions satisfactorily rewritten by adding specific detail. The special interest of these compositions, contradictory as it may seem, lies in their mediocrity.

### THE GAME IN THE BARN

#### *Original Composition*

One rainy day we played a game of Grey Wolf in a large barn. The wolf was hiding. We all climbed up the long latter into the smothering hay-loft and slid down a dusty hay-chute. The wolf heard us so we crawled through a hole, through many spider webs, into a separator room and locked the door.

In one corner of the room there was a very large table covered with thick dust and cob-webs. There was some hay hanging from the ceiling over the table. In another corner there was a very, large tank and also dusty, with a small hole in it allowing a ray of light into the darkness.

The wolf came and tried to open the door. He said, "I won't play. That is not fair." We opened the door and rushed out, and went running after him.

#### *Corrected Composition*

The wolf put his head in his arms and leaned against the door and started to count loudly. Helen, Edith, and I climbed up the ladder very hurriedly, stepping on each others fingers and jumped into the hay. The wolf called, "Ready?" He heard our steps in the hay so we all rushed for the hay chute and slid down very quickly and crawled through many spider webs, into a separator room and locked the door.

Helen scrambled into one corner and sat on a dusty table overhung by hay, Edith into another corner and climbed into a large, dark tank with a small hole allowing a ray of light into the darkness. I stood in front of the door with my feet on the separator, so that the wolf could not get in should the lock come open.

The wolf came and tried the door but it would not come open. He rattled the knob, pounded on the door with his tightly folded fists, kicked it, but still it would not come open. We were very much pleased to see that he could not get it open and we all laughed aloud. The wolf called, "That is not fair. I won't play." We broke open the door and went running after him.

## A SATURDAY MORNING

*Original Composition*

One morning about eight o'clock I heard my friend call for me. I went to the door and he said, "Come on out and play." I told him I would be out in a minute and went in the house and put my coat and hat on.

We walked down to the corner where the other boys were. All of us wanted to play a different game, but finally we all decided to play "Go, Sheepie, go."

We chose two captains and they each chose a side. We then pitched up a nickel to see which side should go out first.

The side I was on won and got to go out first. Our captain took us up the street and hid us in some lady's yard. Before he went we decided to have three signals, red, blue and green. Blue meant the other side was coming, red meant they were close and it was dangerous. Green meant that they were far away and for us to watch for the signal to run.

After a little while had passed we heard our captain call, "Blue." In a little while he called, "Red," and we crouched back farther in the yard.

After a little while more we heard him call, "Green," and we crouched ready to run at the word.

In a few minutes we heard him cry, "Go, Sheepie, go." and we ran out of the yard and away like frightened deer. We could hear the other

*Corrected Composition*

Our side was the first to go out in a game of "Go Sheepie, Go." We went up the street whistling merrily and bound for a good time. We went around the corner and then sneaked back and hid in some lady's yard. We hid in a large coal shed and shut the door.

We decided to have three signals red, blue and green. Blue meant that the other side was coming, red meant that they were close and that is it was dangerous, green meant that the other side was far away and for us to listen for the signal to run.

We were talking when all at once we heard our captain call, "Blue," and that silenced us at once. Soon he called, "Red," and we crouched in the shed like frightened mice.

In a little while we heard him call, "Green," and we opened the door and slipped around the house ready to run at the signal.

"Go, Sheepie, go!" The sound was as fast as that of a pistol and we sprang away like frightened deer. We ran swiftly down the street, and we could hear the other side coming down another street and that made us run the faster. We won by a

side coming down another street and that made us run the faster. We got in to the base just a second or so before the other side came in and were happy to think we would get to go out again.

narrow margin and that made us very happy.

### *Second Year. Description*

*One of the early assignments.*—Subject: A building. Special problem, to avoid giving information and to make the composition purely descriptive by making the time definite. The description must have a stationary point of view. Test question for each detail: Is this true all the time (information), or only at the time represented (description)?

## THE WALNUT HILLS BRANCH LIBRARY

### *Original Composition*

The bright electric light streamed from the windows and doors, and from the tall carved iron lamps, which stood up like sentinels on each side of the six steps leading to the vestibule. At the top of the steps were two large fluted columns with carving at the tops. From each side of the vestibule were two square half columns. At the background were the doors, half glass and wood. The main part of the building stood up high with a triangular shaped roof silhouetted against the dark blue grey sky. The wings on each side of the building were plain and square in shape, not as high as the main part with three windows in each section. The color was a white grey ornamented with squares of darker bricks, and relief carvings.

### *Corrected to Make the Time Definite*

The bright electric lights streamed from the windows and doors, and from the tall carved iron lamps, which stood up like sentinels on each side of the six steps leading to the vestibule. At the top of the steps two fluted carved columns cast pale shadows between. At the background the glass doors glimmered brightly and crystal-like. The main part of the building stood up high with a triangular shaped roof silhouetted against the dark bluish grey sky. The square wings on each side stood out a dull white grey with the soft light from the three windows in each illuminating the scene.

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*One of the early assignments.*—Choice of subject: Driving through a covered bridge. Passing under an electric light at night. A wave breaking on shore. Purpose of assignment, to reproduce the real truth of the circumstance (sound, shadow, etc.), without a previous hint.

## THE SLEIGHING PARTY

The moon flooded the clear, cold night with a bright light, making the valley, and the long, gray, covered bridge as light as in day.

The music of the sleigh-bells sounded in the distance growing nearer and nearer, until it was accompanied with the ring of horses' hoofs' and the merry laughter of the sleighing party. Louder and nearer skimmed the sleigh until the tramp of the horses' told that they had entered the covered bridge.

Then the air was filled with the screeching and screaming of the runners over the bare boards and the loud tramp of the horses. First the tramp was loud then fainter telling that they had neared the middle, then loud again until the air was filled with the music of the bells and the music of the sleighing party floated fainter until it faded away on the other side of the hill.

#### A SNOWSTORM

The old-fashioned gas street lamp flickered and sputtered as the wind drove little particles of snow into the flame. The snow fell softly and heavily and already the bare limbs of the trees stretched white and ghostly in the little circle of light thrown by the lamp.

The soft scrunch! scrunch! of footsteps grew louder and louder and a man came quickly within the light. He was walking swiftly and carefully, his hands thrust deep into his pockets and his collar turned up about his ears. His hat and shoulders were already thickly powdered with the feathery snow. His shadow, growing shorter and shorter as he neared the light moved jerkily behind him. Then suddenly as the man passed the lamp, his shadow switched around in front of him, bobbing and lengthening grotesquely as the man passed into the semi-darkness beyond the lamp.

#### THE WAVES ON THE SEA SHORE

The long stretch of sandy beach was washed incessantly by the roaring foaming waves of the ocean. They came splashing and foaming up the sloping beach, then finally exhausted went rippling back filling up little holes on the shore and making a dark wet outline on the hot sand of the beach.

They flowed back into the ocean just in time to meet another tide of rushing foaming waves which broke roaring and tumbling over each other and then with a rippling sound ran up the sloping beach farther than the tide before it.

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The writer of the following composition is a country girl whose father is a truck farmer. She often helps him in the field.

*Assignment.*—Choice of subject: A person at work. Composition must contain no explanation.

#### DOC AND THE FARMER BOY

The farmer boy threw the harness on old Doc, hung the water jug on the hames, and springing to his back slowly started towards the cornfield to plow. He hitched the horse to the plow and with a loud, "Get-Up! there!" started

down one of the long rows of dew laden corn. The boy with the lines about his neck, fixed the plow at the right depth in the ground and urged old Doc on a little faster. The green blades parted and let the old horse and the plower through, then closed again. The horse nibbled at the blades of corn and they flew back and hit the boy in the face and sprinkled his shoulders with dew. They piled the damp earth close around the roots of the corn for it was to be the final plowing. The rustling of the corn blades and the muffled steps of the horse were the only sound made as they passed through the row. The merry whistling of the boy ceased and with a, "Whoa! Ha-aw," the horse was turned around and they were ready to start back, across the field.

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The boy who wrote the following composition was an excellent runner. He afterwards became one of the champion swimmers of the city.

*Assignment.*—Same as above, "Person at work."

#### THE MILE RUN

"Last lap. Sprint!" came from the throats of all. A man with a red C on his shirt held the lead, working hard. He tried to sprint, but had no wind. Some persons in the crowd shouted encouragement, but he heard nothing. The crowd was a dull blur. All that he could see was the track which tilted or seemed to tilt up ahead of him. Half way around he stumbled, and almost fell, from sheer exhaustion. He was staggering wildly, his breath coming in queer gasps. He dug his shoes into the resin and tried to regain his stride. By the time he had succeeded in this, he heard the dull thud of foot-steps behind him. His eyes turned and the muscles of his legs and chest jerked and tugged. He kept his eyes on the track and counted to keep his stride. When he came upon the stretch his feet sometimes hit the track too soon; sometimes the track dropped down, almost out of reach. Now he was still in the lead, running with mouth wide open, and eyes half shut, close to the finish. There was one awful second when the tape seemed to fade in the distance. When he was least expecting it, he felt it break across his chest. He dropped exhausted to the side of the track. He had won the race!

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Written in an advanced class but too good an example of specific detail to omit. It tells exactly what the writer saw and not what she knew from what she saw.

#### GOING UP TO CONEY ISLAND

*(On the Ohio River near Cincinnati.)*

Thro' the window of the dancing salon showed the back of a piano. Over it bobbed the light hair of the strenuous banger, at one side a pair of hands beat a rapid tattoo on an unseen drum. Above, slowly revolved the heads

and arms of the dancers, held as stiffly as possible, either rigidly extended or cramped close to their shoulders. Still farther above, the highly polished ceiling reflected the hats or bare heads of the crowd below; another room of people dancing on their heads. The piano groaned out the seventh repetition of a popular tune, the drum pounded out a deafening accompaniment. A profusion of blond curls passed leaning on the shoulders of a green and brown checked coat and in the ceiling above a blue feather danced with a head of brown hair. A black ostrich plumed hat waltzed by with a fiery mop; in the ceiling their doubles hopped and glided. The music banged on; red, purple, green and orange hats passed with black, brown or yellow heads, and the ceiling was covered with red, black, yellow and purple moving spots. The dancers hitched into view, jerked around in a turn, and hitched away to appear and reappear again. The piano at last stopped, the drum gave its ending beat, the heads slowly ceased to revolve and in a few seconds the ceiling reflected only the lights and the polished floor below.